

Digital Age Learning

The Changing Face of Online Education

Steve Wheeler

Plymouth Institute of Education, Plymouth University, U.K.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online education was once quite simple. As a new form of distance education, it bridged the gap between those who could reach formal education and those, for whatever reason, who could not. Many institutions invested in web delivery as a primary means of engaging remote students, and a whole discourse rose up around the idea of 'online education.' It was a radical departure from the traditional correspondence courses, because it enabled instantaneous communication and feedback between students and their teachers, and allowed synchronous as well as asynchronous delivery of content. Video and live chat soon became desirable, and even essential facets of the online learning strategy. Content delivery was controlled by the experts through Learning Management Systems, and discussions were conducted via e-mail and bulletin boards. There was talk of the Virtual University, but it never really materialised. Instead, many universities adopted a blended (earlier referred to as a dual mode) delivery of their courses, which involved all of the above techniques, and a mix of other face-to-face and paper based activities. The online delivery model became a stable, reliable method for distance education for millions of students around the globe.

Then came the advent of Web 2.0 and social media and things changed, boundaries blurred and the pace of change accelerated. The rapid development of platforms and services that enabled users to both upload and download content was a departure from the previous, 'sticky' and content led approach of Web 1.0. Suddenly, in the age of the Social Web, user generated content was high profile and ubiquitous. Students began to share their own content through blogs, wikis, podcasts and videos. Platforms such as YouTube, WordPress, Blogger and Wikipedia became the first ports of call, and the

user statistics grew exponentially. This was perplexing for many established online course providers. It was perplexing because they were no longer the sole arbiters of 'knowledge' and no longer held the exclusive right of mediators of learning. Many academics questioned the veracity of content that was created by 'amateurs', and many rejected that notion that knowledge could be generated, shared and repurposed freely. Issues of copyright, intellectual property and provenance became uppermost in the minds of teachers and lecturers. Many questions and much soul searching resulted:

In today's digital age, are Learning Management Systems still required, and is e-mail now increasingly anachronistic? Students now connect on social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter and converse through mobile text. They generate their own content on a regular basis and act as the nodes of their own production. Increasingly informal collaborating comes naturally through the new tools and technologies that constitute their personal learning environments. Add to this mix the meteoric success of Massive Open Online Courses and Flipped Classrooms, the popularity of online social games and prospect of new, emerging technologies such as augmented reality and wearable systems, and we continue to question the future of our current online educational provision. Is online learning now so common place and accessible that anyone can do it? Are we reaching the point in the development of technology that we are now in danger of repeating the mistakes we made when correspondence courses led to the ignominy of 'diploma mills' and ill reputed, fake degrees? What would we need to put into place to prevent this from happening in today's knowledge economy?

In this presentation I will address many of the above questions and offer my personal views on the future of online education in the Web 2.0 digital age. I will pose several questions including: What is

digital learning? How can teachers and students harness the power of tools and technologies for formal learning? What is the changing nature of knowledge? What will be the future of education, in the light of the radical changes and emerging technology? Ultimately, we will discuss issues that will impact upon all teachers and educators in the coming years: What will the next few years hold for online education? What will be the new reality for learning, knowledge and ultimately, human intelligence? Are learner expectations unfulfilled by the current provision of traditional educational institutions? How much will the roles of teachers be required to change? What new theories and practices will we need to develop to stay relevant in an increasingly technological world where the learner is taking control?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Steve Wheeler is Associate Professor of Learning Technologies at Plymouth University, in South West England. Originally trained as a psychologist, he has spent his entire career working in media, technology and learning, predominantly in nurse education (NHS 1981-1995) and teacher education (1976-1981 and 1995-present). He is now in the School of Education, at the Faculty of Health, Education and Society.

Steve teaches on a number of undergraduate and post-graduate teacher education programmes in the UK and overseas. He researches into e-learning and distance education, with particular emphasis on the pedagogy underlying the use of social media and Web 2.0 tools, and he also has research interests in mobile learning and cyber-cultures. Steve is regularly invited to speak about his work and has given keynotes and invited lectures to audiences in 30 countries across 5 continents. He is currently involved in several research programmes related to e-learning, social media and handheld technologies.

Steve is the author of more than 150 scholarly articles, with over 2500 academic citations and is an active and prolific edublogger. His blog Learning with 'e's is a regular online commentary on the social and cultural impact of disruptive technologies, and the application of digital media in education and training. It currently attracts in excess of 150,000 views each month.

Steve is chair of the Plymouth e-Learning Conference, and between 2008-2011 was also co-editor of the journal Interactive Learning Environments. He serves on the editorial boards of a

number of learning technology and education related open access academic journals including Research in Learning Technology (formerly ALT-J), the International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (IRRODL), the European Journal of Open, Distance and eLearning (EURODL) and Digital Culture and Education. He has served on the organising and executive committees of a number of international academic conferences, including ALT-C, ICL, EDEN, IFIP and AICT.

In 2008 Steve was awarded a Fellowship by the European Distance and E-learning Network (EDEN), and in 2011 he was elected to serve as a member of the Steering group of EDEN's Network of Academics and Professionals (NAP). Between 2008-2013 he also served as chair of the influential worldwide research group IFIP Technical Committee Working Group 3.6 (distance education) and is author of several books including *The Digital Classroom* (Routledge: 2008) and *Connected Minds, Emerging Cultures* (Information Age: 2009). He lives in Plymouth, on the South West coast of England.